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Attorney general's 'bombshell of the week' arrives on schedule

THE THEORY that the Billy Carter affair, while embarrassing for the administration, had already done its major political damage is bound to be revised by the latest admissions of Attorney General Civiletti.

Earlier, when Mr. Civiletti had to revise his denial that he and the President had discussed the advisability of Billy registering as a foreign agent, the attorney general's associates were compelled to open an investigation. Now it seems he kept to himself for six weeks the news (presumably of CIA origin) of major Libyan payments to the President's brother. So that in-house probe has been enormously broadened.

In an unfortunate lapse from judiciousness, Senator Bayh, who heads the Senate inquiry, has exonerated Mr. Civiletti on the latest revelation. The senator, too, is in a curious position, since he had seen the same report furnished the attorney general. Though both are constrained by rules designed to protect the sources of intelligence data, someone will have to ask who decided, and why, that the President couldn't be told such potentially damaging news. The who presumably was CIA director Stansfield

Turner. The why is anybody's guess.

So the new developments raise the legal and political stakes. It's going to be important to know the real reason Mr. Civiletti kept his associates in the dark for six weeks on a matter so potentially embarrassing to the administration if someone later were to learn the news and cry: "Cover-up!"

The Washington Star says more than 100 Carter administration officials — including senior people in the White House and Justice Department, plus the heads of the CIA and FBI — are bound to be questioned by the Justice Department's Office of Professional Responsibility. That office has been reconstituted as the nearest thing to a special prosecutor. But the inquiry is still under the management of an official who, technically speaking, works for Mr. Civiletti.

Aren't any of President Carter's associates worried that the six-week concealment of important knowledge about his brother was smack in the middle of the primary season, when the struggle for delegates was so heated? Or are they hoping the Republicans will behave like gentlemen this fall and fail to bring up the political implications?